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Self-awareness and personal development plans of students

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Abstract

As students are highly influenced in the learning process by their emotions, they also need a proper time for self-reflection. This paper aims to present the main insights of business students in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania when challenged to set their personal development plans, after reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses observed especially through JOHARI window used in class and three self-assessment questionnaires—drivers (working styles), career anchors and Belbin (team roles). Building personal development plans is an important step in the educational process. Although not taken at its real value because of the young age of the students, it is an activity that should be considered each semester, very well linked to the management discipline and to the career development of students/future graduates.

Keywords: Students, personal development plans, motivation, educational process.

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1. Introduction

There has been an increasingly trend towards the teacher seen as a facilitator compared to the teacher seen as a supplier of information. In their learning process, students are highly influenced by their emotions and a good sense of self-awareness. Students cannot properly develop their knowledge unless having a proper time for self-reflection and even a special time for building a personal development plan.

While the general goal is an increase in the learning motivation and enhancement of the educational process, this paper aims to explore students' self-awareness and its use to their career development. The case-study method was used by relying on the voluntary participation of students who wanted to write some ideas about their strengths and weaknesses and a series of SMART objectives that are useful for their future careers. Students were also asked to explore some ways to attain their objectives. When analysing their works, the focus was put on the reflective approach and on the students' motivation to learn.

2. Education and students' development plans—a brief literature review

Motivation in education refers to all the factors stimulating and energizing the learning process (Hrbackova & Suchankova, 2016; Radu, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Even if, in many cases, we see the educational process as having a main driver from the learner (intrinsic motivation), emotions influence learning and thus the role of a teacher as a facilitator is very important (Radu, 2014).

As many authors suggested, self-reflection and development planning should be used in education in order to support students' motivation, the development of leadership skills and individual careers (Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011; Hunt, Langowitz, Rollag, & Hebert-Maccaro, 2017; Nesbit, 2012). It is important to understand that self-reflection includes both self-judgement and self-reaction (Zimmerman, 2002). Thus, while self-reflection starts with thoughts (self-judgement), it should be followed by a series of emotions and actions (self-reaction).

Development objectives should be chosen voluntarily (Clardy, 2000). Many people would say that objectives are for sure voluntary, as long as they are developed by them. However, this idea should be taken with caution. By following this, for example, all the smokers who understand (rationally) that they do not want to smoke anymore are able to give up quite fast, which evidently it is not true. Objectives do not have only to be rationally well-understood; they should really come from the inside of the individuals.

Despite the general idea that development plans should be used as a support for students' career, some studies suggest that planning skills are not sufficiently developed in the educational process as a key skill of students (Chuvgunova & Kostromina, 2016). Of course, this does not diminish the role of plans, but it makes us understand that we might encounter some challenges and barriers that need to be overcome.

3. Case study—main findings and results

The case-study method was used for this empirical research in order to find some patterns of students studying business in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics (REI), first and second years of study. Thus, students were challenged to set their personal development plans, after reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses observed especially through JOHARI window used in class (Luft & Ingham, 1955) and three self-assessment questionnaires—drivers (working styles; Kahler, 1974), career anchors (Schein, 1996) and Belbin (team roles; Belbin, 1993).

The activity by itself was aimed to assist them both in the short term for the learning process at the university and in the long term for developing their future careers. However, the homework was

voluntary; thus, there were 49 students who wanted to reflect on their personal strengths and weaknesses and to develop their personal development plans.

After receiving their answers and assessing them in May 2017, text data were also processed using QDA Data Miner Lite software, by assigning codes.

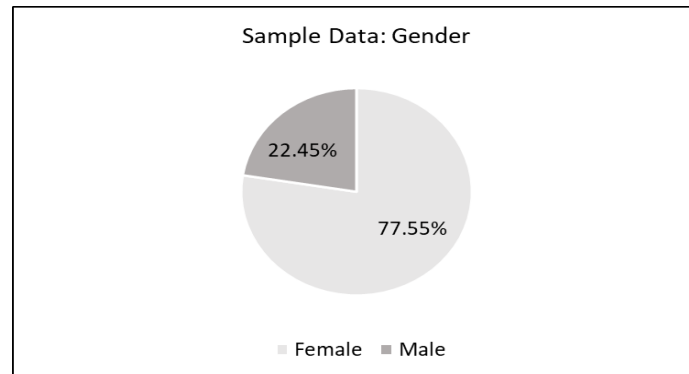


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents (gender)

The information was grouped into two main categories:

- discovering themselves—validation, awareness of something ‘new’ and connection to goals and
- being more self-motivated to learn—reading, personal development, international exposure and a sense of direction

The total number of codes was 228, assigned to 49 cases.

3.1. Discovering themselves

With respect to discovering themselves, students confessed that they had a series of their strengths and weaknesses confirmed, they could find some others they were not previously considering too seriously and they could relate all these individual characteristics to their own SMART objectives and personal development plans. The table summarises the frequency of codes.

Table 1. Discovering themselves—Distribution of codes

Category	Code	Count	Codes (%)	Cases	Cases (%)
Discovering themselves	Validation	47	20.6	34	69.4
Discovering themselves	Awareness of something ‘new’	32	14.0	26	53.1
Discovering themselves	Linking goals	58	25.4	37	75.5

3.1.1. Validation

In many cases, students expressed that they had their main strengths and weaknesses confirmed. Some examples are the following:

- [...] *Indeed, autonomy describes me very well because I like being independent like I said in development plan. I like doing the things in my way because I try to be quite original. [...]*
- [...] *I found out that my main strength is attention to detail, which is true [...]*
- [...] *it confirmed what I've already known, that I am a freethinker, creative and imaginative person. [...]*
- [...] *I was not surprised when I found out that I do not do very well in teams. I have always thought that I can do much better on my own because every time when I was in a team I felt like I was slowed down by the other members. [...]*
- [...] *Indeed, I am that type of person that wants stability on every plan and to control every aspect of my life. [...]*
- [...] *the high score in be perfect indicates that I insist on getting attention to details, which is true [...]*
- [...] *these three tests and also the JOHARI window helped me boost my confidence, because there were things that I already knew about myself, but I wasn't completely sure about them [...]*
- [...] *As a specialist (SP), I discovered one main feature regarding to the love of learning—which I have to agree that it's very true—and the fact that I am careful about my involvement in unsafe things like spontaneous chores to do or unstructured meetings. [...]*
- [...] *'hurry up' is also a good result for me because I am never patient with anything or anyone. I want everything to be done fast [...]*

3.1.2. Awareness of something 'new'

Students also became more aware of some of their traits that were previously not so evident or that were even hidden on purpose. Some of their ideas from this perspective are the following:

- [...] *I found out many new things about my personality and I am glad to know that I can have a technical role in a team and also entrepreneurial creativity. [...]*
- [...] *these were tools that made me discover another myself and provided a new perspective, which was the reflection on my career choice. [...]*
- [...] *I learnt that I could be very good in the following roles: plant and specialist. I have not thought about these before, but maybe I would start to develop them little by little and, who knows, maybe some good things might happen. [...]*
- [...] *At the beginning I didn't expect that I will learn so many things about myself through these tests, because I thought I was conscious about my qualities and my weaknesses. But that seems to be a misconception idea. [...]*
- [...] *The last result [lifestyle] was actually a surprise as I have never emphasised it when it comes to career, but now thinking about it made me realise of its utmost importance to me. [...]*
- [...] *'please people', result that I was surprised of, because I often find myself distant in a way. But, indeed, I do think that in order to access deeper information about a person you have to get close to them and so try to bring down the walls by offering them a comfortable environment. [...]*

3.1.3. Connection to goals

Students showed that in deciding what suits them best and not matter which their strengths are, having a correct overview of their personality and potential is very important. Thus, taking personality test that reflects to a certain degree certain part of their abilities, and focus may be one of the most productive choices made in order improve their professional and personal life. As they mentioned, the tests not only helped them to discover more about themselves in terms of strengths and areas of improvement but also made them articulate some goals and thus link their characteristics to particular steps to take in their career and personal life, as they thought about what they should develop in order to be successful.

- [...] it should be a job that requires attention to details, checking information, creativity, and also team work, because at the moment I know what positions to occupy within it. [...]
- [...] I plan to open a private after-school, where I can teach children foreign languages, rules of good manners and behaviour. A few years ago I used to be an entertainer for children’s parties so I developed some experience and strategies to work with them correctly and peacefully. Also, my career anchors influence me to contribute with something helpful to the society. [...]
- [...] I will try to care more about myself, not just about the others (caring about the others is very good, but I have to care also about me) and try to be more focused when I start doing something and finish it no matter how hard it is for me. [...]
- [...] Now that I’ve seen exactly my type of personality and how I really am, I have to think of some ways to improve the good parts and to try to get rid of the bad parts. [...]
- [...] I will try to find a job that will allow me to use my creativity and innovative side, while working with people [...]
- [...] I am not the best at specializing on only one thing and do that at a really high potential. That leads me to the conclusion that I need other people around me that can get into the depth of certain jobs while I will do my best in coordinating the overall process. [...]

The distribution of codes referring to *discovering themselves* is graphically expressed in Figure 2.

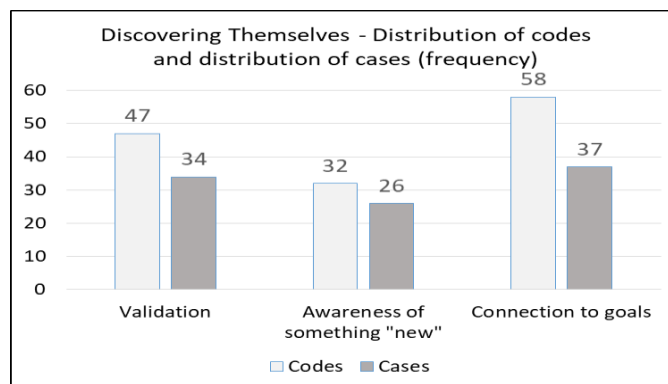


Figure 2. Discovering themselves—Distribution of codes and distribution of cases

3.1.4. Being more self-motivated to learn

Self-reflection also made students more self-motivated to learn in general, which was observed through their intentions to read more, to enhance their personal development and to be more exposed internationally. I could also observe a kind of sense of direction that can lead to an enhancement of the educational process. The distribution of codes is presented in the following table.

Table 2. Being more self-motivated to learn—Distribution of codes

Category	Code	Count	Codes (%)	Cases	Cases (%)
Being more self-motivated to learn	Reading	17	7.5	14	28.6
Being more self-motivated to learn	Personal development	23	10.1	23	46.9
Being more self-motivated to learn	International exposure	22	9.6	17	34.7
Being more self-motivated to learn	A sense of direction	29	12.7	24	49.0

3.1.5. Reading

Most of the students included in their personal development plans the need for reading more:

- *[...] For example, in order to improve my knowledge, which I don't necessarily consider it a weakness, but I know I can gain more, I plan on reading two books a month (I read a book a month and I believe I can do more). [...]*
- *[...] read more. For example.... [literature] [...]*
- *[...] reading more specialised books or articles [...]*
- *[...] read 1 book/month + making the video review of the book for my NGO colleagues—this helps me improve my public speaking skills and the skills of speaking in front of a camera; it also helps me improving my competences regarding summarizing and extracting the essential information from the book. [...]*
- *[...] I plan to read the following books (one book per week): [...]*

3.1.6. Personal development

Students expressed their need to develop particular skills. Sometimes, these skills were directly linked to their own career goals; however, in most of the cases, these skills referred only to some ways to relax and thus be able to perform better in general:

- *[...] I plan on gaining valuable skills and experience that would help me to be successful in that job. These skills are interpersonal skills, communication skills and creativity. [...]*
- *[...] As a first step, I would like to do some Personal Development courses and maybe some Influence Training and Principles of Persuasion courses/workshops held by a speaker I really appreciate, [NAME]. I consider that nowadays being persuasive and supporting your ideas with confidence is mandatory to succeed in almost any situation. [...]*
- *[...] learning how to trust other people and their work is one of the parts I must work on, since the past experience has showed me how difficult it can be to finish a group project. Also, I think learning how to deal with crisis situations should be on my priorities list. [...]*
- *[...] I would like to try new things in the near future: I would like to learn to swim and take some dance classes, everything that improves me mentally or physically. ...]*
- *[...] more public speaking exercises [...]*

3.1.7. International exposure

As expected (the group comprise students studying business in english), using various methods, students are interested into developing their international experience.*[...] Next year I will learn a lot from a great experience at the University of Malaga, in Spain, as I always wanted. [...]*

- *[...] travel more beginning next year and meet new people from different cultures in order to get a better understanding of how the global society works. [...]*
- *[...] Next semester I will study in Porto. I am doing this because I want to broaden my perspective and meet new people from different cultures. [...]*
- *[...] Therefore, another important career goal is to accumulate experiences such as learning about the cultures of different countries, meeting new people and basically becoming familiarised with customs and traditions worldwide. This will only increase my tolerance levels and change perspectives. [...]*
- *[...] talk more with foreign colleagues [...]*

3.1.8. A sense of direction

Students have the opportunity to analyze themselves in a more sincere manner and thus work on proper solutions.

- [...] *To begin with, I think that making a development plan is a necessary thing in order to achieve your goals/objectives, as setting up clear steps, will help you a lot in the process of structuring your ideas, and also will give you an overview of the problem. [...]*
- [...] *My long term goal is to do more volunteering. Volunteering offers vital help to people in need, worthwhile causes, and the community, but the benefits can be even greater for me. It can help me reduce stress, combat depression, keep me mentally stimulated, and provide a sense of purpose. [...]*
- [...] *After solving these three assignments (the Belbin Test, the career anchors and the drivers questionnaire), reading the interpretations and developing my personal development plan, I felt like I got a boost of self-confidence and some directions that I should follow in order to find a job and a life-style that perfectly suits me. [...]*
- [...] *It really made me think more about myself and that I want to do some changes in my life. [...]*

The distribution of codes referring to *self-motivation to learn* is graphically expressed in Figure 3.

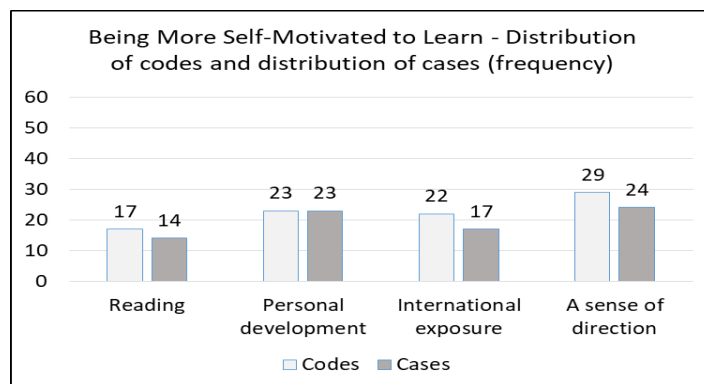


Figure 3. Discovering themselves—Distribution of codes and distribution of cases

4. Conclusions

By completing their task, students could obtain more in terms of discovering themselves and also took a step further towards being more self-motivated to learn.

While the results express very well the reality of the context in which my research took place, they cannot be generalised. Moreover, these results reflect only one side of the educational process (the learner), while it should be important to also consider the other side’s perceptions (the teacher and also the others)—more objective perspective.

A student-centred approach better communication with students and a proper method of challenging them to be more self-aware are fundamental keys to success in the process of teaching and learning. Although not taken at its real value by students due to their young age, I will use the activity of setting personal development plans in future by taking into account also some potential improvements (a more structured approach).

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